

A BRIEF ACCOUNT
OF THE
AWAKENING AND CONVERSION

OF
DAVID SMITH,

PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL,

IN THE

AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH.

*"Come unto me all ye ends of the earth, and I'll tell you what
the Lord hath done for my soul."*

WASHINGTON CITY:

PRINTED BY D. RAPINE, ACT.

1822.

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THE author submits the following sheets to the public, at the request of many of his friends, and should they be the means of bringing one sinner from vice and immorality to serve the true and living God, it will not then have been written in vain.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT, &c.

I was born in Baltimore County, in the state of Maryland, in 1798, of irreligious parents, who as well as myself, were born slaves. Not then being in the possession of any learning, I am now obliged to present to you the first of my convictions from memory, without adverting to minute or memorandum. When I was about nine years of age, my uncle who lived in the same family, took me with several other boys to Hunt's Meeting House, in Baltimore County. The Rev. John Chalmers was preaching; the impressions I then received, remained with me for a long time. One evening I was at my uncle's house, I perceived him to go out of doors, curiosity prompted me to follow him, he was attending to his secret prayer, I heard him say in his prayer, "Oh that the Lord would bless sinners." Immediately I thought that I was a sinner, which words I placed in my heart, and the reflections I had on them, made me consider very seriously on serving the Lord, and changing my evil life. A few months afterwards, I was sold to a new master,* a slave for life; the severity of my master and the wicked company I had to mingle with, caused me to leave off prayer; and the good impressions that I had while in the service of my old master, were driven from my mind. I then went on from one degree of wickedness to another for the space of three years; yet I went to meeting sometimes, and let it alone more often, until the condemnation which I felt, the thoughts that I had, the various workings of my mind, the promises I made, caused me to try and serve the Lord again. In a short time, I was sold a second time.† The good impressions were again destroyed; pride entered into my heart, and various other sins which were displeasing to the Lord; I still felt the stings of a guilty conscience; I never could be at ease, always feeling the thunders of conviction through my mind, yet like Paul, I was a persecutor of the saints of God, and declared I never would hear the Methodist's preach any more. About this time I got (or thought I was) very much attached to the Catholics, and I took the general assertions for my consolation, that I could curse and swear, and the priest would absolve me of my sins. The organs used in the chapel pleased me very much. The French who are generally of that persuasion, got very much attached to me—I was invited to dances, frolics, and merry

* Colonel Clemm of Baltimore County.

† To Mr. James Thompson, Baltimore City.

company. I was wandering about in this way for a great while; I found it to be a solitary way, "seeking rest but finding none." Although I persisted in going to dances, I never could or would learn the abominable art of card-playing, but would always give my right hand to any kind of mirth, and would run a mile to hear the sounds of a violin. I was at a far distance from all my relations; I had nobody to instruct me; my daily thoughts were how high I could swear, how proud I could walk, and what length in wickedness I could run, till at length for my disobedience, I was sold again for life, to a third master.* Then my days of sorrow began. My new master was very severe, and very strict in the rules of his house, and allowed me no privileges; I could not go about of nights in my wicked company as heretofore, but being in the possession of much art and low cunning, I used to rise up when the family had retired to bed, and fly to the circle of my wicked companions. At one time, with all my art, I was caught and severely corrected, which brought sorrow to my heart; I then became very steady and had many thoughts about serving the Lord, but considering the difficulties I had to encounter with, I postponed it from time to time. I began to attend very strictly to the Catholic Church, which gave my master and most of the family much pleasure, as they were members of that church, and I "found favour in their sight." His kindness increased unto me; and on one day, he made me a present of a dollar, for my good behaviour and attention to the business committed to my care. That increased my thoughts towards God—I felt as a dove that had lost her mate—I was convinced that it was better to go the "house of mourning, than of feasting." I left off all my out-breaking sins, and all wicked company. I used my best endeavors to gain the affections of my master and mistress, by walking upright and being obedient to their will, and to obtain the good graces of all who knew me; and I praise the Lord, that I was esteemed by my master and mistress very much, with the rest of the family, with the exceptions of my fellow servants, who despised me for my candour to my owners, and good works through the house.

Heaven forbid that I should tax one of my African brethren and sisters with ingratitude; but while I explain to my readers the various temptations by which the wicked one beset me, truth and justice compels me to announce his principal agents in the great work. About this time, my master frequently gave me money, which I carefully laid by, and of

* Mr. Barnabau, the Spanish Vice-Consul, residing in Baltimore.

then said if I was a good Catholic, the Lord would bless me with freedom, yet I was conscious that this depended upon my good behaviour and obedience. In a short time I was taken under a heavy spell of sickness; my master and mistress were very good to me, and the children treated me with kindness; but the servants still continued to despise me and wished for my death, but the "prayer of the wicked prevailed not." They persisted in their unkindness, not even giving me food to eat, unless they were driven to attend to me, and by false representations, turned the heart of my master and mistress against me; and, like Joseph, I was hated and despised by them. One friend only was in the family for me,* who attended to my several necessities, during my sickness; read and expounded the word of God to me, which brought me to reflect seriously on the many promises I had heretofore made to my Maker in my afflictions. The pain I endured in my sickness is past the tongue of man to describe; I was confident that I would die, and if I died in that state, I thought I would go to perdition. I prayed much as well as I knew how, till at length the Lord heard the sinner's prayer, and raised me from my afflicted bed, after an illness of six weeks.

I continued after my illness to attend the Catholic Church, but found on second consideration that I should never experience a change of heart in that church, as there were many things done there that were incomprehensible to an ignorant person. It made me frequently reflect on breaking my promise, relative to visiting the Methodists, and hear their preaching again; and when considering that if God would pardon my former transgressions, he would pardon that also, that is, if I attended the Methodist meetings contrary to my vow. I felt the necessity of a change of heart, and endeavoured to walk uprightly, that I might please God, and obtain the favour of my master; but the vanities of the world got the ascendancy, and I found myself still a sinner.

About this time as I stood one afternoon at the front door of my master's house, I saw a large funeral (of a coloured person) passing up the street, on the opposite side of which, I saw a mulatto man of whom I enquired who was the person deceased, (the name he told me then has past my memory,) he told me that he was a good man, and invited me to go to the burial ground; I complied with the invitation. When the ceremony at the grave was over, he asked me if I had religion, the question being put to me unexpectedly, and from a stranger whom

* Mrs. Barnaba's sister, named Miss Matilda White, who was a member of the Protestant Church.

I had never seen before to my knowledge, alarmed me to such a degree, that I answered him emphatically "no;" he immediately replied, "you are a handsome young man, and a great deal too pretty to serve the Devil." I asked him his name, and he told me his name was Alexander Murray, I then asked him if he had religion, he answered me "yes," and the expressions he afterwards used to me were like the rattling of thunder through my wicked soul. I returned home and made a solemn vow I would get religion. And on the Sunday following, I rushed through every difficulty and attended the Methodist meeting. While I was there I saw my new friend Mr. Murray, and he began to converse to me very lovingly about religion, I then had an opinion that I could get religion without any person knowing it, and during my friend's conversation I endeavoured to hide my feelings from him. The General Conference of the Methodists was then in session; my friend requested me to attend meeting on the next night, and contrary to my master's rule, I went to meeting that night.* While listening with attention to the words of the preacher, all the sins that I had committed came to my remembrance, my crimes appeared as black as midnight; I was struck to the heart. The preacher exclaimed that "Jesus came down to die for poor sinners;" I considered myself the most miserable of sinners, and the misery that I then felt, is past the power of man to describe. I was then constrained to cry out "save me Lord or I am damned forever." My friend was at my elbow, and told me to "believe on the Lord Jesus and I should be saved." Oh my dear readers, how can I describe to you the horror and misery I felt, none but the great Jehovah, I am sure, knew the inward workings of my soul. I felt no relief that night, and went home crying to the Lord to have mercy on me. This raised anger in the breast of my master, he said I had been with the foolish Methodists, and he chastised me well that night, but his cow-skin did not remove the load of sin and guilt from my mind. My friend called on me, I told him how I had been corrected by my master, and after I had told my tale of woe, he said to me, "Jesus was bound and whipt at the marble pillar," which words gave some ease to my mind. A few nights after I went to meeting again, but the burthen still remained on my mind. My perseverance in endeavouring to experience a change of heart, turned the hearts of my master and mistress entirely against me, and all my old enemies in the house, except my mistress's sister, (Miss White,) who still remained my un-

* The reader will observe my master did not allow the servants to leave the house at night without his permission.

changed friend. I laboured five weeks in this way, through various crosses, trials, and temptations, with a sore back and a heart loaded with sin, until I was often ready to think (by the suggestions of the evil one,) that the way to Heaven was a rough road to travel. At length I made up my mind if I went to Hell, I would carry a sore back and a praying mind with me. About the end of the five weeks, a few days after I had formed my determination, my friend (A. Murray) called on me to attend a watch meeting, it being Saturday night, I had several things to do before I could leave home, I went to prayer thrice before I could start, for I was nearly in the dungeon of despair, and I thought my damnation was sealed. After struggling with myself, we set out for the meeting about 11 o'clock; my friend spake comfortable words to me as we journeyed together, a glimmer of hope sprang up in my soul, and I began to think the Lord would pardon my sins. As we drew near the house and heard the sound of preaching, my hard heart was softened, and tears flowed down my cheeks as I entered into the door. Henry Harden was then preaching, and as he was illustrating on his subject he exclaimed that "Jesus was a balm to cure the wound that sin had made" if we would only acknowledge ourselves sinners in his sight—Immediately I cried out, "Lord I am a sinner, save me or I perish!" My heart was broke into pieces and melted down like butter before the fire; the clouds were removed, joy sprang up in my soul, and I could join with David, saying, "come unto me all ye ends of the earth, and I will tell you what the Lord has done for my soul; as far as the east is from the west, so far has the Lord separated sin from my soul."

I returned home the next morning, and every cloud of sin was gone, and it appeared to me that I was in a new world; but as soon as I entered the door of my master's house, I felt like Paul, declaring Christ Jesus to all around, and telling them that he had power upon earth to forgive sin. My master declared that he would whip all that religion out of me, and he used his utmost exertions to accomplish his designs on me, but all his severities proved abortive, for the more I was afflicted the better I attended to my business, till my master was constrained to say he had nothing against me, only, that now I was a Methodist and looked too sanctified for him, and would ruin all the family. He continued to treat me with severity until he was wearied, as I believed; and after he had corrected me unmercifully he said "the fellow takes a great deal of beating about his religion, but I expect he is like the rest of these ruffians of Methodists, who when they take any thing in their head it is useless to try to persuade it out of them, or en-

deavour to beat it out of them, therefore, I will be no longer plagued with my man David." He told me he would sell me as far away as he possibly could, if I did not renounce the Methodists—I told him I could not leave them, and added, if he sold me to Georgia* I would choose it in preference as my abode to serving the Devil, as I then felt the love of God upon my heart. He then with bitter oaths reviled me, and said that "God was a damn'd fool to give a negro a soul."—I then left his presence. The next morning he advertised me for sale to South Carolina or Georgia; when I heard the news, I was satisfied with whatever state of life I was placed in, so I enjoyed the spirit and power of religion in my soul, having faith in Jesus Christ my Lord. I retired to secret prayer, and while I was praying, these words came with power unto me, "fear not, for I will be unto you as a parent, in the days of thine afflictions;" my soul was filled with the love of God, I cried out loudly, "I am willing to suffer all things for the excellency that is in Christ Jesus," my faith was strengthened more and more, I was glad to be counted worthy to suffer affliction for my heavenly master's sake. I prayed earnestly all that night; my young mistress had promised that she would pray for me also; I arose the next morning with joy in my soul, and my heart abounding with the love of God. About ten o'clock my severest trial appeared, but thanks be to God, "sorrow lasts only for a night, and joy springeth up in the morning." A Georgia trader agreed with my master to purchase me; my young mistress (who always appeared to be much attached to me for my good conduct) spoke these words to me (as I then thought) for my consolation, "is your faith strong in Christ," I answered it was; she then said "the Lord will do great works for you," and in fifteen minutes she purchased me from my master, and thus it was, I escaped from the hands of the trader. In a few weeks I had to leave the house, and in a very few weeks more, my mistress manumitted me, and gave me free papers, saying these words, "David keep religion and attend to your meetings, I know the Lord will bless you, see what the Lord hath done for you already, you are now free."—She also condescended to give me advice how I should conduct myself through life; my heart was overflowed with joy, and like a bird let loose from the cage, I scarcely knew which way to go, yet I took these words for my consolation, "they who put their trust in Jesus will never be confounded." A few months after I received my liberty, it bore

* The then Botany Bay for my poor African brethren, in Maryland, a journey without our consent, to that place, was a punishment.

heavy on my mind to get a wife, and thereby escape the censure of the world, who scarcely ever hesitate to speak evil of a young man who is striving to save his soul.

The sabbath after my reflections on marriage, I went to meeting and there I saw a young woman whom I had never seen before, and as I was a stranger to her person or character, I enquired her name; I was told it was Nancy Prout, the words that were then mentioned pleased me and I visited her the next week—paid my addresses to her, and we were married in three weeks from the time of our first acquaintance; and I can truly say, although our family did increase to six children, we never wanted bread, and she ever remained, for the twelve years that we were together, a kind and affectionate wife.

I was seriously called to preach the Gospel about eight years after my marriage, and as I frequently unbosomed my mind to my wife, she would say, "many are called but few are chosen," and "it is time enough to think about preaching" and such arguments as that, until I yielded to what she said; and by this I grieved the holy spirit of God, and at length became backslidden in heart, and lost many of those kind feelings I had for the people of God; and at length the Lord laid me on the bed of affliction, and there it was He told me what I should do, but when I arose from my afflicted bed, I kept not the promise I had made, and from time to time I put it off until I believed, or thought I believed, that a man who did not know how to read, had no business to attempt to preach. The Lord laid his afflicting hand on me again, and I then felt convinced that God would damn me if I continued to disobey his commands. Then I wept and mourned to the Lord, that if he would spare me a little longer, I would attend to his call; God knowing my ignorance, raised me up again. One Sunday morning after my illness, going to my class in the Bethel Church, I unbosomed my mind to my leader, relating the secret that my wife and I had kept hid for four years; he recommended me to the quarterly Conference, and I obtained licence to exhort in the country places. I went on speaking in my weak way for some time, and I then considered that I was discharging my duty, and obeying the commands of the Most High God. I had friends and some enemies, because I could not think as many thought, who made profession of religion, and I was therefore hated and despised by many of the members of our Church; and through the persecution that I had to endure, I was never called up for trial at any time, yet my crosses and difficulties were exceedingly great; but the Lord blessed my labours whithersoever I went. Several months passed away until the sit-

ting of the second annual Conference in Philadelphia, where I had an anxious desire to attend the Conference, and had concluded with brother Shadrach Basset to walk there together—Our arrangements displeased my wife and I was compelled to give her the slip. The first day of our journey, we went twenty-two miles—stopped with a coloured family and were very kindly treated. We went the next day as far as Little York, we preached there and were well treated for a few days; we went to Columbia and preached there in the African Meeting House, and left that place for Lancaster, where we met brother Henry Harden; we preached in Lancaster and journeyed on to West Chester, in company with brother Harden, who was on horse back, which prevented us from being company on the way. About seven miles from the town of West Chester, we perceived that there was a heavy gust arising, it thundered with lightning, very severely, we used our best efforts to reach the town before night, but being wearied by travelling, we were disappointed, for night came on and it was extremely dark, so much so that we could see each other only by the lightning. When we arrived at the town, we knew not where to go, but the Lord provided a place for us. The next morning we went three miles from town, near the Western School, brother Harden had preached there that night; and the next day, my friend and myself went into Philadelphia, where we met with a kind reception from the brethren, and were admitted to seats in the Conference, although we were of no higher order in the church than exhorters. A few days before Conference commenced, I presented a note to the bishop, stating my willingness to travel and preach the Gospel of Christ Jesus my Lord. He received me cordially, and gave me an appointment on the Harrisburg circuit, there under the direction of brother Harden. I rode and preached on the circuit for one year. My greatest troubles commenced while on this circuit. I am not in the possession of language to describe the many difficulties I had to encounter. My wife was very sick and then residing at Little York, but her health continuing so very bad for three or four months, I was compelled to move her to Columbia. The fire of persecution began to raise then to such an alarming height, that I was tempted to believe that the house of God had become as a den of thieves; but those that made no profession of religion paid some respect to me and my family. My wife still continued very sick; the flesh appeared to waste off her bones for some months, till she looked as a mere skeleton; she thought that the day of her death was fast approaching, and her whole cry was, "if I should go to Hell, I will charge these hard-hearted wretches for my damnation;

“carry me back to my native place, for if I die here, I shall go to Hell, for I can find no rest day or night.” The doctor gave it as his opinion that she could not travel five miles. I was then called to Baltimore to attend the annual Conference; I related my circumstances to my friends, or those who treated me as such, and through their assistance, I attempted to take her to Baltimore, believing that the Lord would spare her, till she arrived at her native place. The first day of our journey we arrived at little York; stopped at the house of Israel Williams, where we were treated very kindly, but my wife was very low, and I suspected that night she would not possibly live till the morning. We set out the next day and arrived safe in Baltimore with three children. The friends were glad to see her once more; God powerfully awakened her soul again, and for eleven days she enjoyed the love of God in this life, and then departed to a better world, declaring, in the hour of her death, that she had a full assurance of her acceptance with God, and that she had peace in the Lord Jesus Christ; after her declaration she fell asleep. Then was I left with four small children to protect; I had to labour under many difficulties, still God fought my battles, and I came off more than conqueror. A woman that called herself my friend, in Baltimore, took two of my children to board with her; charged me a high price for their boarding, and still she sent my daughter, Elizabeth, in the streets to pick up rags to get them bread—I thought very hard of such treatment but I held my peace. But oh, reader, if I was to relate to you some of the many difficulties that I endured in the course of the year I lost my dear wife, you would surely say, “does a preacher of the Gospel possess such fortitude.” My crosses and difficulties were of such magnitude, that I thought Satan had let loose the artillery of perdition against me; I was tempted to put a period to my existence, but out of all my afflictions, the Lord did deliver me. Not being a Mr. Talkative,* I never could have much to say privately to the people; I had generally to reveal my secrets to myself, and that was my greatest consolation. I never saw a man yet that I could trust or unbosom myself unto. The persecution of the people in the circuit which I rode was very great at times, and particularly in Columbia, there I got attached to a certain woman, and partly had made an engagement to marry her, but I enquired of my God, and saw she would not suit me. The people raged as though Satan was let loose from his den. In the spring, I went on to Baltimore to the Conference, there I was ordained

* See Pilgrim's Progress.

an Elder, and then the persecution arose in Baltimore against me. I went from that place to the Philadelphia Conference; there I was much imposed on by women, which made me declare, that I would keep out of their company altogether, still I had some person or other to tell me, that this woman, or that, would answer for my wife, till I got disgusted with the place, and was filled with the wrong spirit. I received my appointment for the Western country—Conference arose, and the next morning I started to my station without bidding any of my friends farewell. My heart was grieved—my soul was wounded at many things that occurred in the small space of time that I was in the city of Philadelphia, and on the last of May, 1820, I arrived in Pittsburg.